

January 8, 2007, is No Child Left Behind's fifth birthday. This isn't just another milestone to be celebrated (or mourned). It also marks the time that the law is due for an update from Congress. But will NCLB be reauthorized on schedule? And what changes are likely? No one knows for sure, but some might be in a better position than others to cast prognostications: the ubiquitous "Washington insiders." So we asked for their predictions.

We surveyed 20 such insiders via the Internet from December 8-15. Twelve responded; their names and affiliations are listed at the end of this research brief. While this is not a "representative sample" of thousands, these twelve experts do have inside knowledge and bring a variety of perspectives. They span the ideological and political spectrum and work as lobbyists, association leaders, think tank analysts, and scholars. The entire results are printed below; here are the major findings:

1. It's almost unanimous: Reauthorization is not likely until 2009. Eleven of our twelve respondents believe that the law won't be reauthorized until after the 2008 presidential election. This view is at odds with what politicians have been promising. Following November's mid-term elections, President Bush cited the law's reauthorization as an opportunity to forge common ground with the Democrats and said he expected the new version to get through Congress in 2007. Representative George Miller, the incoming chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, says it's "a very, very high priority," and promises to push a new bill through the House in 2007. Simply put, most Washington insiders aren't buying these promises.

2. An overhaul of the law is not likely. Our survey also suggests that, whenever the law is reauthorized, its major contours are likely to remain unchanged. Respondents generally agree that Congress won't mandate national standards (all 12 view this as "somewhat unlikely" or "not likely") or testing in history (9 of 12), will keep the requirement that states disaggregate test scores by race (12 of 12), will maintain "public school choice" (9 of 12) and "highly qualified teachers" (11 of 12), and will refuse to take on collective bargaining agreements that enfeeble NCLB's "cascade of sanctions" (10 of 12). Tweaks, not a total rewrite, appear most likely to occur.

3. Significant changes have already been foreshadowed. Our insiders believe the Department of Education's recent actions are the most telling indicators of how the reauthorization will proceed. Most think the Administration's growth model pilot program, for instance, will translate into a statutory provision allowing states to voluntarily use such measures in their accountability systems, within certain parameters. (Eleven of 12 view this as "somewhat" or "very likely.") Similarly, they agree that the reauthorization will incorporate the department's pilot program allowing schools to offer supplemental education services (SES) before public school choice (11 of 12). And many say that it's at least somewhat likely that Congress will adopt the Administration's proposal to include the results of science testing in schools' adequate yearly progress determinations (9 of 12).

4. Major battles remain. While the most likely changes to the law are incremental, some big policy fights are shaping up. The respondents were split, often right down the middle, about whether Congress would provide incentives for states to adopt national standards, increase dramatically the flexibility states or districts could receive through a "charter state" or "charter district" provision, maintain the requirement that students new to the country participate in state accountability systems, or focus on "highly effective teachers" instead of "highly qualified" ones. These issues are still up for grabs.

Implications

Our insiders see a long road ahead for NCLB reauthorization, with only minor changes likely at the end of the process. Still, we shouldn't think that Congress won't take some unexpected detours. After all, the highly-qualified teachers and supplemental services provisions were not even being discussed in 1999 when reauthorization discussions began over NCLB's predecessor, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. No crystal ball is ever 100 percent accurate. But those hoping for NCLB to go away or be transformed are not likely to get their wishes.

Survey Results*

1.

When is the most likely time that Congress will reauthorize the No Child Left Behind Act?													
2007	1												
2008	0												
2009 or later	11												
Never—the law will be repealed or allowed to expire	0												

When Congress reauthorizes NCLB, how likely is it to...

2.

Maintain the requirement that test scores be disaggregated and tracked by race?													
Very likely	12												
Somewhat likely	0												
Somewhat unlikely	0												
Not likely	0												

* Listed in order from most likely to least likely to occur.

When Congress reauthorizes NCLB, how likely is it to...

3.

Maintain the requirement that most students with disabilities be included in state testing programs?													
Very likely	11												
Somewhat likely	1												
Somewhat unlikely	0												
Not likely	0												

4.

Maintain the Reading First program?													
Very likely	9												
Somewhat likely	3												
Somewhat unlikely	0												
Not likely	0												

5.

Allow states to adopt a growth model voluntarily, within certain parameters?													
Very likely	10												
Somewhat likely	1												
Somewhat unlikely	1												
Not likely	0												

6.

Maintain the "highly qualified teachers" provision in some form?													
Very likely	10												
Somewhat likely	1												
Somewhat unlikely	0												
Not likely	1												

When Congress reauthorizes NCLB, how likely is it to...

7.

Switch the order of public school choice and supplemental educational services (SES), so that SES comes first?													
Very likely	6												
Somewhat likely	5												
Somewhat unlikely	1												
Not likely	0												

8.

Maintain the “persistently dangerous schools” provision?													
Very likely	5												
Somewhat likely	6												
Somewhat unlikely	1												
Not likely	0												

9.

Allow districts “in need of improvement” to serve as supplemental educational service providers?													
Very likely	4												
Somewhat likely	7												
Somewhat unlikely	1												
Not likely	0												

10.

Continue to allow collective bargaining agreements to override NCLB’s “cascade of sanctions,” including its restructuring requirements?													
Very likely	7												
Somewhat likely	3												
Somewhat unlikely	1												
Not likely	1												

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When Congress reauthorizes NCLB, how likely is it to...

15.

Narrow the eligibility for public school choice to only individual students below the “proficient” level?

Very likely	1													
Somewhat likely	6													
Somewhat unlikely	3													
Not likely	2													

16.

Maintain the requirement that immigrant students be included in state testing after they've been in the country for at least a year?

Very likely	4													
Somewhat likely	2													
Somewhat unlikely	6													
Not likely	0													

17.

Require districts to equalize the distribution of experienced teachers across schools in order for their Title I schools to be considered to have “comparable” resources?

Very likely	2													
Somewhat likely	4													
Somewhat unlikely	4													
Not likely	2													

18.

Provide incentives (extra money or regulatory relief) for states to participate in national standards and a national testing regime?

Very likely	0													
Somewhat likely	6													
Somewhat unlikely	6													
Not likely	0													

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When Congress reauthorizes NCLB, how likely is it to...

23.

Require state accountability systems to mandate steady improvements for students already above the “proficient” level in reading and math?

Very likely	0													
Somewhat likely	2													
Somewhat unlikely	5													
Not likely	5													

24.

Raise the proportion of Title I funds that must be spent on public school choice and supplemental educational services (beyond the current 20%)?

Very likely	0													
Somewhat likely	0													
Somewhat unlikely	2													
Not likely	10													

25.

Adopt national standards and tests and mandate that all states use them?

Very likely	0													
Somewhat likely	0													
Somewhat unlikely	1													
Not likely	11													

Survey Participants

We would like to thank the following Washington insiders for participating in this survey:

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